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ABSTRACT

A study was made of children beginning school, to learn more about their response to school and how to help them adapt to it. Participants in the study's year-long first phase were 36 teachers from two very different local education authorities (LEA) and 92 children who started school in 1985-86. Teachers identified activities and organization in their classrooms and observed children's responses in the first month of each term. The second phase consisted of a case study of one class of beginning students, who were observed in play groups and nurseries for a month before starting school and during the first 4 weeks of school. This summary report discusses what skills children need to function in a classroom, the formation of a class in the first 4 weeks of school, classroom expectations, teachers' recognition of patterns in individual children's responses, the nature of children's involvement, and topics explored in an inter-professional workshop seminar. A table summarizes areas of experience which affect children's responses to classroom expectations. In conclusion, recommendations are offered with specific attention given to helping teachers recognize the structures they create in classrooms, the thinking upon which the structures are based, and the significance of classroom structures for pupils' learning. (RH)

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STARTING SCHOOL

an AMMA digest

A summary of the report commissioned by AMMA and carried out by Dr Gill Barrett of the Centre for Applied Research In Education, School of Education, University of East Anglia, Norwich

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'We tend to forget because it's so easy for us, we tend to forget how hard it was for us to learn. I think we tend to expect them to do more than what they can do.'

Parent

'Jonathan was pleased as today it was his turn to do the biscuits again. He realised this would be his last time. Suddenly his time at playgroup is running out. I'm trying to convey that to him.'

Parent

In 1984 AMMA made headlines with its report on the disruptive behaviour of many children in reception classes. As a follow-up, the Association commissioned a study of reception children to find out more about their response to school and to suggest how they can be helped to adapt to it. The study was carried out by Dr Gill Barrett of the Centre for Applied Research in Education at the University of East Anglia.

Dr Barrett started with three assumptions: that evaluation of response behaviour must start with the teacher's understanding of behaviour and classroom organisation and then seek the child's view of them; that behaviour is a manifestation of knowledge and can therefore change over time; and that reports should seek to understand children's behaviour and then suggest forms of action. She did not set out to make judgments or to apportion blame.

The research addresses two principal questions. What are children's responses in school? What do these responses mean? Answers came through essential supplementary questions. How can children's responses be observed? What is the environment in which these responses occur? What are our beliefs and understandings about children? What experiences and knowledge do children have before they come to school? What practices help children adapt to school? These questions were studied in two phases of the Project, which ran from September 1985 to June 1986.

In phase one, teachers from two LEAs took part. One LEA was in the North of England, the other in the South; one a metropolitan and one a county authority. Thirty six teachers were involved over a period of a year. The 92 children in the study were born between September 1980 and August 1981. They all started school in 1985/6.

The teachers identified the activities and organisation in their classroom and observed children's responses to them in the first month of each term in 1985/6. Their observations and analyses were backed up by information about the schools' catchment areas, organisation, and other relevant matters.

The second phase of the research was carried out by Dr Barrett herself as a case study of one reception class. She observed the children in playgroups and nurseries during the month before they started school and for the first four weeks of school. Parents were involved at this stage. Volunteers were asked to record observations of their children before they started school and to take part in interviews afterwards.

Finally, some of the points identified as important by parents and teachers were discussed more fully with teachers and headteachers.

No reception class teacher will be surprised to find that the report calls theirs 'a difficult and frustrating task'. They do not have 'the resources, time or support structures to do the task to their satisfaction'.

The report's conclusions

'... we have so many pre-conceived ideas about what children ought to be able to do when they come into school and very rarely do we actually admit to school - I've never admitted to school - a normal child, a child who is totally ready for school (in every way) and yet invariably we are aiming our teaching at the normal reception child.'

Headteacher

'... they have learned to do a lot of things before they come to school without any systematic programme, just at their parents' elbow but we give the impression that once you step through school there are certain things that you don't do as parents and so a lot of natural support that children have been given has actually been taken away because of the school's attitude... so I do honestly think that we've got to re-think our ideas.'

The report draws together the perspectives of teachers, parents, head-teachers, and, of course, the children, in an attempt to understand the responses that individual children make to classroom situations. Discussion and analysis of all these perspectives by teachers, an inter-professional seminar, and Dr Barrett led to the following six principal conclusions:

Children need to learn, know and use 'survival skills' to function confidently in a classroom. These include knowing:

- who they are and what they can do;
- that 'experience' has some meaning for them;
- that they have a right to their own interests and knowledge;
- what school is for, and what it is in physical terms;
- how to be with, consider and communicate with other adults and children when necessary;

- who teachers and other adults in school are and what they are for;
- how to help themselves in activities such as taking coats off, going to the lavatory or organising themselves in a chosen activity;
- how to cope with and overcome 'not knowing' things and the feelings this arouses.

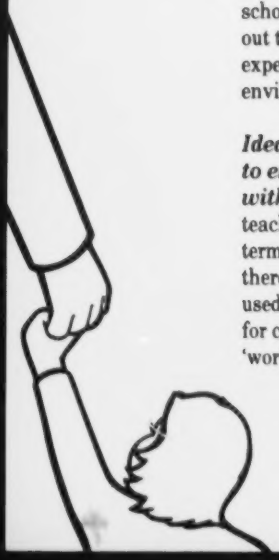
Not knowing any of these (but particularly the first and last) leads to children's feeling uncertain, out of control and apparently confused. At the extreme their responses are difficult to cope with in large classes but frequently (initially at least) related to confusion rather than 'bad' behaviour. Knowing the above depended on experience, expectations and opportunity to learn and practice them.

Teachers' ideas of 'development' learned in training do not help them understand what reception children know and how they respond to school.

Teachers need to be able to respond to individual children as need is identified because the relevant curricular experiences and survival skills of children vary greatly. For instance some children have not learned to move confidently in large spaces with large numbers of people, but may already be able to read; other children may not know what a book looks like but can confidently find their way around the classroom and school and talk to people.

The staff-pupil ratio in infant classes is inadequate - particularly in the Summer term if Summer born children are admitted as rising fives into existing classes. Teachers whose schools had three intakes during the year were unanimous in spelling out the disadvantages for these children — and the extreme stress they experienced in trying to maintain a calm, relaxed, caring and learning environment for all the children.

Ideas about 'work' and 'play' in classrooms need to be clarified to ensure that parents, teachers and children can communicate with understanding about curricular activities. For example some teachers referred to 'work' as 3 Rs activities but many children used the term in relation to any form of 'hard' learning, regardless of activity if there was an adult expectation attached to it. Many teachers valued and used structured play activities as important means of effective learning for children but felt some parents only saw 'work' at desks as important, 'work' which in the long run may be educationally less effective.



Teachers, parents and other professionals feel a need for more links between themselves and children's home and school learning.

Through the research, practices and further suggestions emerged which responded to the learning needs of reception children and their teachers.

The bulk of the information that lay behind these conclusions arose from the observations and other details provided by teachers and heads in their varied schools. These schools were in contrasting geographic, socio-economic, ethnic, urban or rural catchment areas with new or old communities and with varying degrees of unemployment. The teachers themselves had varied lengths of experience of teaching reception children and had from four years upwards of total teaching experience. The schools, approaches to curriculum and organisation, teachers and children were different, and no attempt was made to make them or the data provided 'the same'. But, as the conclusions show, there were similarities that emerged as well as differences. Both similarities and differences aided understanding of children's responses in school.

The first four weeks

'When a child comes to us we have to accept what that child is. Now it may not conform to what we consider to be norms of behaviour... but what we've got to do is be sensitive in getting it to the stage where we can communicate.'

Headteacher

'Jonathan didn't say much about school today, only that he's done some more writing. He told me that Q was for queen and U said 'Ooo' and was for umbrella, but he wasn't going to bring them home.'

Parent

'All three of them are totally different. Richard's sort of academic - well, not academic, but he's not a physical boy - and Mary's a bit romantic about things, I suppose you could say, and this one - he's physical; with a hammer in his hand, he's happy.'

Parent

'After only a week at school he seemed very grown-up, quite eager and happy to do very ordinary things that before were a real struggle to get done - dressing, washing, even bedtime and getting up. I think he could see a reason for doing such things.'

Parent

'When we say that children adjust or "settle down" to school then we may be in danger of missing the crucial point: that they are being subjected to a compelling socialisation process much of which offers persuasive rewards, but as a result of which they learn to accept their place as very junior members of an elaborate social hierarchy.'

Newsom Report, 1977

The case study of reception children was carried out in a school within half a mile of a city centre, in an area of mainly Victorian terraced housing with some 1960s council property, including high-rise flats. Modern additions had been made to the original Board School buildings. The full case study gives details of the children's pre-school experiences. (See p.29 for instructions on ordering the complete report.)

Twenty-three summer-born children were starting school in January, mornings only, with an experienced teacher who had not taught a reception class before. Dr Barrett had spent some time with one the previous term and had visited a local nursery and playgroup attended by some of her pupils. Most of the children had visited the school; some had older brothers or sisters there. Most had been to a playgroup or nursery school.

This meant that parents and children had different degrees of knowledge about the school building and the people and experiences that would be encountered in it. This knowledge, and the pre-school experiences of children and parents, were affected by the length of time the parents had lived in the area and by the nature and extent of their professional and social contacts.

To start with, the teacher had the help of a welfare assistant who could spend much of each morning with the new children, but over the four weeks of the study her time with the reception class was gradually reduced.

During the first week there were some things that were unfamiliar to all the children. They did not know what was expected of them and had to learn the ways of thinking and organisation of the teacher and other children. Besides learning to adapt to other people, they had to find out what they could initiate for themselves.

It was almost equally bewildering for parents, as the children were vague or even appeared to be secretive about what happened at school. One child was impatient with his mother because she did not know what went on there. One reason for this lack of communication was that the children's limited experience of the activities made it difficult for them to go beyond their immediate impressions. Another was that they simply did not have, nor were given, the language to describe their activities.

However, the pupils started to show rather than tell what they had been doing in school. Parents variously reported that the children were more willing to sit still and concentrate at home, or to take more interest in drawing, counting, puzzles or writing. By the end of the first week there was a noticeable increase in confidence in the classroom.

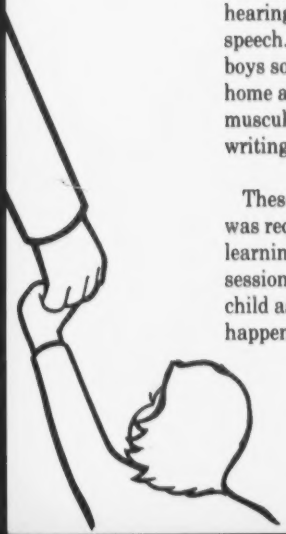
One of the most important lessons was sharing, which, towards the end of the third week, became 'less than harmonious' as far as the playdough was concerned. Sharing was also expressed in talking — sharing activities and knowledge.

Already the children's knowledge was being assessed in particular dimensions. Asked to draw a person, one girl produced an accomplished sketch that reflected her interest in people and her pre-school experience of drawing. Another child made an ill-formed attempt, then rolled up his paper and used it as a trumpet — but his mother showed Dr Barrett drawings of a tractor and trailer that showed much more manual control and an informed knowledge of mechanical things.

'Differences of experience between the children were obvious in all the activities that they were expected to engage in,' writes Dr Barrett, but she points out that these differences were not always immediately obvious. They could even be detected in the way children watched television; most attended to what they saw rather than to what they heard. It seems that they need to understand what words are about before they can listen to them properly. Similarly, the children needed to know what was expected of them before they took part in any activity.

Besides the different experiences children had had before starting school, there were significant physical differences. One girl whose hearing loss had recently been corrected had not yet acquired clear speech. Another had difficulty in making certain sounds. One of the boys sometimes claimed to be deaf (as his sister was) when he was at home and was getting used to wearing glasses. Several lacked the muscular control necessary for specific activities such as dancing or writing.

These differences between children made uniformity, even where it was required, a virtual impossibility. There was, however, much learning, through copying, in situations — like music and movement sessions — where the children could see and hear each other. If one child asked to go to the toilet, others would follow suit; the same happened when a child fell on the floor.



By the end of the second week the children in general seemed confident within the school social setting. They were more willing to approach the teacher and instigate conversations. In the third week they were beginning to know each other and refer to each other by name. They were learning and gaining confidence from each other.

The report's conclusions mention the lack of generally accepted definitions of work and play. There was a similar lack of agreement about what constituted fighting, and where the boundary between playing and fighting lay. Fighting aside, the children were noisier by the end of the third week, but this reflected their growing confidence. They were becoming more skilled and more accustomed to school routine.

One mother commented in the fourth week that her daughter was becoming 'really wild and naughty at home'. The child's grandmother suggested that 'They're being pinned down more at school than what they were at playgroup so they have to let go.' Certainly, Dr Barrett observes, the children were more organised than at playgroup and 'writing and number activities began to take precedence over existing learning and knowing'.

'At the end of the fourth week at school,' Dr Barrett writes, 'the children were beginning to understand what school meant to them just as they were learning what other children said and did... Each child came to school with different experiences, and their expectations of the classroom were idiosyncratic — they behaved as individuals.' However, 'over the four weeks, as they learned what was expected of them, it was increasingly easy to perceive them as a class as they engaged in the same teacher-directed activity.'

In this new environment there already seemed to be a gap between what the children were being taught and what they knew. They were learning to do what was expected of them. 'Are the individual children in danger of learning not to be learners in their own right?

Expectations

'I think our parents are concerned but find it difficult to articulate their concerns.'

Headteacher

'I don't know what the age of innocence is now but it's certainly not five – not with some of our children.'

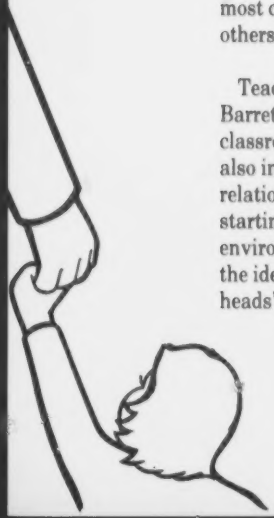
Teacher

Following the case study, the report examined teachers' discussions and understandings of children's responses to school and classroom expectations. These expectations were shown to result from a mixture of what the head, teachers and parents believed about education.

Headteachers of the schools taking part in the study variously saw schooling and education as leading to 'development of the whole person, provision of survival tools, finding personal meaning for life, learning skills, and building on what was already known as part of a process of learning'.

Parents were thought by headteachers to have even more varied expectations. Some wanted a baby-sitting service; others saw the reception class as the first step on the road to university. Some were most concerned that their children should be happy above all else; others worried about the three Rs.

Teachers, including heads, had to take account of parents' views. Dr Barrett says that they 'organised and managed their schools and classrooms in relation to not only their own beliefs about education but also in relation to their responsibilities to the parents and the relationships they believed were significant within the school. Children starting school were therefore entering a locally manufactured learning environment. However, there was potential match or mismatch between the ideas and expectations of individual children, parents, teachers and heads'.



Family background was an important factor in children's knowledge of themselves and others. Some had little experience of real family life — father came home in the middle of the evening and ate by himself; the children had a playroom separate from the rest of the household. Some teachers reported much more family feeling in poor or deprived homes.

Some children had a hard time at home: 'One little fellow was locked up in his bedroom... because mother had men downstairs.'

On the other hand, others had love and care but were still ill-prepared for school. Schools with predominantly Asian intakes found some pupils were passive and sometimes retained babyish behaviour. One head attributed this to the fact that, in Asian families, sitting quietly for long periods constituted good behaviour in children.

Knowledge and Responses

'We've got an automatic toilet - and he's frightened of the flushing bit. He hasn't been going.'

Teacher

'Sarah suddenly realised that we were actually taking note of what her Mum said, and so she felt that was a plus for Mum...'

Teacher

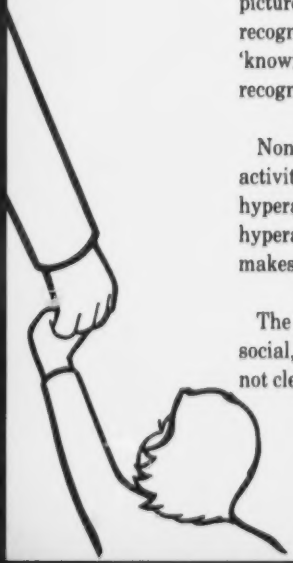
'It is proving more difficult to actually settle the children into an already established class and it is also much more difficult to actually organise time to work with the children.'

Teacher

The report goes on to look more closely at what teachers saw when they observed the face, body and voice responses of particular children in the classroom. Teachers began to recognise patterns in how children responded to different activities or organisation. These also provided a picture of the changes that occurred in children's responses. Teachers recognised that as children moved from 'not knowing' something, to 'knowing' it and 'being involved' their responses changed. They also recognised the problems when children are 'not involved'.

Non-involvement could result from previous bad experience of the activity concerned. It could also be a consequence of tiredness or hyperactivity (one of the appendices to the report deals specifically with hyperactivity). Whatever the cause of non-involvement, its existence makes it difficult for the child to start the process of learning.

The children's knowledge — or lack of it — falls into four categories: social, intellectual, personal, and effective. In fact, the boundaries are not clearly defined.



These four categories of response occurred in relation to many different expectations, e.g., being able to move in a large space, leaving Mum, getting to know other children, using a pencil, sitting on the carpet, moving out of the room, etc. In describing these responses to teachers' expectations in the classroom, Dr Barrett shows how they relate to feelings, but also how children show these differently in their facial, bodily or vocal expressions.

One teacher observed a boy whose face was always dead pan; another reported that a girl constantly smiled, whatever happened. One boy with a blank face expressed excitement by making his voice louder.

Teachers noted, however, that individual children had consistent patterns of responses. These seemed to be recognisable to other children with similar response patterns. The report also gives further insight into what lies behind these four categories of children's responses which emerged through discussions with heads, teachers and children.

Dr Barrett outlines areas of pre-school experience, curricular experience, or organisation or attitudes within the home, school or classroom that affect what children know. She describes four areas of children's knowledge.

The areas of children's knowledge (or lack of it) may be divided into apparently neat packages:

social — knowledge of how to mix with and talk to other adults and children in different situations for different purposes.

intellectual — use/knowledge of ways of perceiving, thinking about, analysing and organising their 'world' experiences in order to make meaning of it — this includes understanding of 'space'.

personal — (self concept) knowledge of themselves as a social being with feelings and knowledge and as an individual, separate from others in body and thought — both of which can be self controlled.

effectiveness — ways of representing and making public what they knew and ideas they created — gross body action (all forms of 'doing' games, role play); painting; drawing; modelling; and oral and written language.

However, in the social experiences of the classroom which have intellectual expectations of individuals and built in assumptions about 'doing', the areas cannot really be separated. The result is that, for example, lack of knowledge of wider social situations can lead to apparent lack of knowledge in other areas. Or knowledge in one significant sphere — e.g. self concept — can lead to knowledge in another. When children start school their pre-school experiences provide the foundations of their existing knowledge in these spheres.

The Table shows in summary form the areas of experience which affect what individual children know and hence their responses to classroom expectations. These responses depend on the match or mis-match of a child's experience with classroom expectations.

These factors were further discussed at the final meetings with teachers when wider issues of education and possible suggestions for 'good practice' were being considered. Four major areas were identified by these teachers' meetings:

1. the significance of home and pre-school experiences;
2. the individual in classrooms and schools;
3. concepts of work and play in relation to learning in schools;
4. beliefs about 'development' and 'learning' in relation to starting school.

A stable family, in which the child knew who everyone was and how they related to each other, provided a firm base from which to learn from experiences offered by everyday life —shopping and cooking as well as activities specially for children. The extent to which children were given freedom to explore on their own also affected their understanding of their experiences and ultimately of themselves.

Responses related to the child's personal knowledge — what the report calls self concept and confidence — are difficult to define. Teachers saw this knowledge in terms of how a child approached other people and apparently new expectations; they also used the word 'maturity' in this respect.

Confidence showed itself in many different ways. It seemed to bear no relationship to a child's social class or cultural origins, but to have some link with the confience of one or both parents. Children who had been to nursery or playgroup had more confidence than those who had not; one teacher wondered if they had too much.

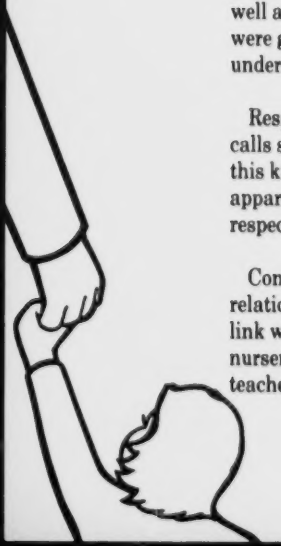


TABLE THE FACTORS THAT AFFECT THE MATCH OR MISMATCH OF CHILDREN'S PRE-SCHOOL EXPERIENCES TO THE EXPECTATIONS OF SCHOOLS AND CLASSROOMS

	Column 1 Child Starting School	Column 2 Home Experiences and Expectations	Column 3 Classroom Experiences and Expectations	Column 4 School Experiences and Expectations
PERSONAL HISTORY OF SIGNIFICANT PERSON CREATING EXPERIENCES	• All pre-school experiences as in Column 2 • Interests • Personal style	**PARENTS** • Experience as child • Education • Interests/employment • Birth experience child/parents • Personal style	**TEACHER** • Education • Previous teaching • Initial training and INSET • Personal style • Interests • Cultural origins	**HEADTEACHER** • Education • Experience as teacher • Previous headships • Personal style • Interests • Cultural origins
FINANCIAL, PHYSICAL, SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT	• School experiences as created by factors outlined in Columns 3 and 4 • Classroom and school size and organisation • Equipment in classroom • Number and age of children in class/school • Number and role of adults in class/school	• Geography • Housing • Employment • Diet • Family size and position in family • Range and continuity of social contacts	• Classroom size/position/resources • Organisation of school/class • Size of school/class • Staffing • Number and experiences of children • Contacts in school and community	• Statutory factors governing schools • D.E.S./L.E.A. policies • Finance • Catchment area • School building • Contacts with other schools and community • Intake policies
PERSONAL, CULTURAL AND SOCIETAL VALUES/ ATTITUDES	• Self concept • Response to activity and authority of school (related to parental values and attitudes and personal interests)	• Expression of feelings • Forms of communication • Employment • Education/schools • Authority • Success • Learning • Self concept	• Beliefs about role and self • Forms of communication and knowledge • Curriculum • Responsibility for learning • Authority	• Educational philosophy • Organisation of school • Concept of curriculum • Management style
UNDERSTANDING OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND SCHOOLING/ LEARNING	• Ways of finding out and making meaning of their world - (aural or visual perception/language or active representation of knowledge)	• Child-rearing practices • Gender roles in family • Specific learning activities • Playgroup etc.	• Expectations of child starting school • Individual/group/class organisation and expectations • Presentation of curricula activities and expectations	• School structures linking home and school; playgroups and school • Learning and curriculum
FUTURES?	?	• Plans for self/child • Job/family commitments • Response to change	• Plans for self/classroom • Response to curricula and/or parental pressures	• Long term plans for school • Attitude and response to change

School policy on intake turned out to be important in determining children's responses to school. Only three of the 34 schools in the study took in all the year's intake in September. Newcomers might therefore find themselves in a situation where everyone was new, or in a class where children had been in school between one and four terms, or in a vertically grouped class containing reception, middle, and top infants.

All teachers said it was harder for children starting in the spring and, in particular, in the summer term. Opinions differed on how classes should be organised.

Getting involved

'Parents, you see, are funny creatures - I mean, I'm one. They still like an old-fashioned education. They don't understand modern education and still believe, don't they, that unless the children are sitting on a chair glued to a table working, they don't think they are learning properly.'

Headteacher

'I didn't like playtime because it was too big.'

Child

When the report discusses how children get involved and become effective, it stresses again that superficial observations can be deceptive. 'Although children's responses in classrooms frequently could be interpreted to mean that they appeared to know what to do, they did not always move on to the message that they were involved with an activity over a period of time in an "active" way. Involvement appeared to mean that the child's thinking was engaged with the activity as they used some existing way of thinking to "create" new understanding, action or new ideas.'

Dr Barrett distinguished two forms of involvement: making sense of something the teacher expected the child to learn, and re-thinking something in order to do it. The most sustained involvement she observed was when the children were re-creating something they already knew and wanted to do. What the children learned in these situations was affected by the expectations in the classroom as well as parents' expectations and the child's interests and previous experiences.

Many teachers emphasised the importance of practical school routines such as changing for PE. Learning to do this in an orderly way seemed to help the children gain control of both themselves and their environment.

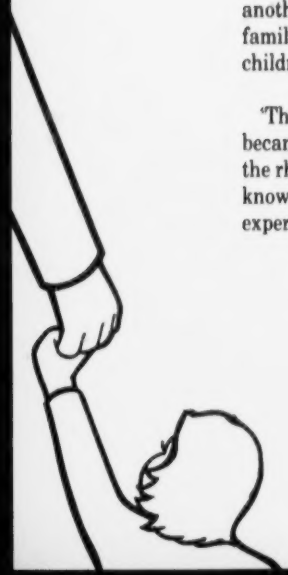
When it came to the three Rs, the children found they were expected to cope with ideas rather than events. This was an area where pre-school experience had a big influence, and parents' opinions continued to be important. Some teachers believed parents tended to place too much emphasis on the three Rs and to have a narrow view of academic skills. Parents who had been to orthodox grammar schools often had difficulty in understanding and accepting the wider approach used in their children's reception classes.

In free-choice activities, children naturally showed preferences. Less obviously, 'some of their interests and existing knowledge were little, if at all, utilised during the first month in school'. Children learned through playing, and this contributed to different definitions of 'work' among teachers.

Another sort of play happened at playtime, though the purpose of these periods did not seem clear. Often, children did not seem to enjoy playtime. For those who had not learned self-control it seemed to be particularly stressful — as did free-choice activity in the classroom. 'The result,' says Dr Barrett, 'was frequently what appeared to be extreme forms of messing about or fighting as responses to other children and occasionally to adults when they used physical means to assert themselves.'

In the classroom, when the children were all engaged on one activity, messing about tended to happen when they tried to take part, when their attempts at joining in met with a negative response from the teacher or other children, or when an alternative activity offered by another child seemed easier or more attractive. Teachers often used familiar songs or rhymes to divert attention from messing about; the children became absorbed and quietened down.

'They appeared to regain cognitive control over themselves as they became involved and their thinking was effective through the actions of the rhyme and their active engagement with it. All four areas of knowledge came together as the [teacher] provided them with a familiar experience with known expectations.'



At this point the report seeks to distinguish between work and play. Some teachers used neither word in relation to the curriculum, but some children had a clear understanding of what work meant to them. 'Hard work makes you sweat,' declared one small boy. Many adults did not understand what play meant to children, or what its value was.

Work was frequently expected to have a visible end product which could be judged a success or failure. Children believed work had some sort of status, perhaps because it was often directed by the teacher. Its end product could be shown to parents and used as evidence of the child's progress.

'How,' Dr Barrett asks, 'can we record and evaluate what children "learn" through play or other forms of experiential and language based learning?'

Play was more under the pupil's control in terms of both its content and the judgement of its success or failure, though play activities could, to some degree, be directed by the teacher. It also provides practical opportunities for children to gain understanding of things like weighing and measuring, and represents what children know can communicate with others.

Both the information collected during the study and the discussions about it raised questions about traditional theories used to understand children. As teachers pointed out, the idea of normal development is hard to sustain. Analysis of the discussions suggested that 'what we see as pupil knowledge is what is made public and depends on [children's] self knowledge'. Many young children, says Dr Barrett, will not learn or show their knowledge unless they are both given the opportunity to do so and presented with the expectation that they will do so.'

Group discussions

'I find now that reception children are definitely harder work than they used to be.'

Teacher

'If I spent time getting them so that they were good writers... I couldn't possibly give them time to experience all the things that I consider more important than that.'

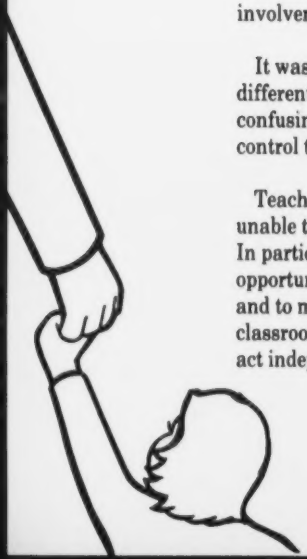
Teacher

These issues were discussed further at an inter-professional workshop seminar. Four inter-professional groups discussed four topics: the ways in which home experiences may affect the starting point of school experiences; the significance of the individual within the school setting; the meaning and significance of work and play for children starting school; and the meaning and significance of such concepts as development, experience, learning, and maturity.

Discussion brought out the wide range of children's pre-school experiences. These covered the family's structure and financial circumstances, the parents' experiences in their own childhood, and the involvement of social and medical services and support organisations.

It was felt that many children experienced different adults who had different expectations of them. The inconsistent authority structure was confusing, as the children did not have the chance to learn how to control themselves or what they knew.

Teachers and other professionals felt frustrated because they were unable to know the children as individuals to the extent they wanted to. In particular, teachers of reception classes needed more time and opportunity to develop their own strategies and observations of children and to make contact with parents. Organisation of schools and classrooms did not help in this respect, nor did it encourage children to act independently.



Recommendations

'I didn't want to go anywhere near the reading or anything. I thought, you know, teachers know what they're doing...'

Parent

'He's been exhausted since he's been at school. He doesn't want to do anything when he comes home. He comes and he lays on the floor.'

Parent

"If there is any hint that standards are reading, writing, and arithmetic are going down [parents] will blame the fact that you are, in their words, "progressive" and they will come down on you like a load of bricks.'

Headteacher

'We started off this class with nothing at all. It is a new class and we have no sand, water, and several other things, so we are sharing with other classes.'

Teacher

Discussions brought out two particular difficulties about effective learning. One was the possible mismatch of the teacher's expectations and those of the child. Following on from this was the teacher's frustration at knowing he or she would almost inevitably fail to match the child's existing experience.

Nevertheless, teachers are expected to cope and to be effective. With the aim of helping them, the report makes a number of recommendations. These are addressed to the class teachers themselves and to others.

The recommendations start with parents, recognising that they themselves are learning and lack confidence, specially where their first child is concerned. Parent support groups could help them, as could early contact with playgroups, schools, and health workers. Many parents bring antagonistic feelings from their own schooldays. 'Structures and actions which help parents to recognise their own worth and their value to their children and to schooling will benefit all concerned.'

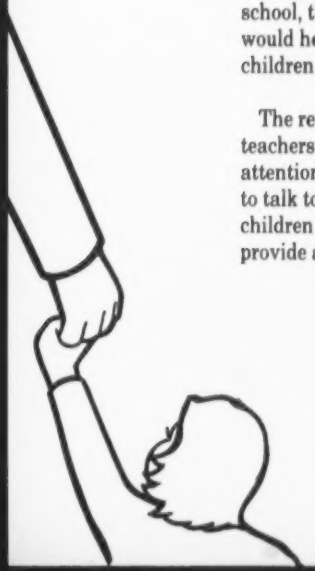
The report recommends that education for parenthood should be part of all children's education. It wants all children, too, to have the opportunity to go to playgroup or nursery.

In school, there should be an ethos where children's existing knowledge is recognised, and where teachers and children wish to learn from one another. The teacher should have opportunities for learning and for self-development and should be involved in all areas of the curriculum. A learner-centred approach is recommended, as are organisational structures which share responsibility between children and adults.

The space used by the reception class should be large enough and flexible enough to respond to the teacher's ideas and the class's needs. It should contain sufficient resources — including people — for all kinds of activities, but there should also be a quiet area, without stimulation, where children can reflect, gather their energy, or quieten down.

To help teachers discover more about their pupils before they start school, they should make more visits to playgroups and nurseries. This would help them to understand the sorts of organisational structures the children knew, and what was expected of them in these situations.

The report also suggests that the working pattern of reception teachers be changed. They should have more opportunities to focus their attention on individuals or small groups. They should also be available to talk to parents during the day, when parents could see what their children were doing at school and so know what support they could provide at home.



Curriculum, usually seen as elements of experience which can be easily classified, should be viewed more widely, Dr Barrett says. 'All the other factors of organisation of self, materials, other people and ideas should also be more overtly recognised as part of the curriculum and not simply subsumed as socialisation... This would help with parents' understanding of the so-called hidden curriculum and make explicit the task of the teacher of reception children.'

The report tackles the questions of teacher training, both initial and in-service. It sees two approaches to initial training. One would give the teacher intellectual stimulus through a subject. This would provide 'a grasp of the questions they need to keep asking about their own classrooms throughout their teaching career'.

The other approach involves intellectual grasp of the theories and thinking about ways of analysing experience and learning and how learning is acquired. This approach would give teachers an understanding of how children think and so provide a starting point for extension and development.

There is a need for a well planned programme of in-service training specifically for teachers of reception classes — not general infant or primary courses. Focuses for particular courses might be what children gain from specific activities such as playing with sand or construction toys. Ideally, such courses would be held during the day and would take the form of workshops.

Some aspects of education are outside the control of teachers and will remain so. These are policy matters, on which the report makes four recommendations. The first recognises the diversity of buildings, social environments, and theories and says these make it inappropriate for standard procedures to be applied to all schools. It suggests that more responsibility in this area be given to individual schools and teachers.

The second policy recommendation asks for flexibility of age of intake. It suggests that children born in the summer should be able to start school in the September when they are four or five.

Third comes a plea for 'teachers of nursery and infant children... to be recognised for their professional expertise and knowledge'. Like other teachers, the report says, they need to discuss their work with their colleagues to develop their understanding. Time should be allowed for this.

Finally the report asks that early schooling be given the same resourcing as sixth forms. 'The major cognitive benefits of early school education should be recognised and valued in the same way that the pre-vocational benefits of secondary education are recognised and valued.'

Tasks for teachers

Dr Barrett then made specific recommendations for individual teachers so they too could gain from the experiences of the teachers on the project. They had helped to develop classroom research methods which they found led them to a greater understanding of their own practice and of the children they taught. As one teacher said when evaluating the project in relation to personal benefit:

> *'I've been asking myself whether I would (from past experience and general, overall classroom management practice) have responded as effectively in the classroom without the research observations - I don't think I would! Generalisations are no substitute for detailed study!!'*

The following activities are designed to help the individual teacher recognise the structures they create in classrooms, the thinking behind them and the significance of them for pupils' learning. These procedures should ideally be shared with other colleagues either in the same school or nearby. Specific times should be set up in order to meet, share and discuss observations, insights and further suggestions. This group discussion is important at the intellectual and professional level. It is also important as 'support' in the learning process that will go on when you feel less certain and need encouragement that it is acceptable to 'not know'.

Task 1 - Identify the Organisation and Physical Layout of Your Classroom

Indiv. a. Draw a plan of your classroom — include equipment — and label the furniture and equipment in relation to its use. Who has access to the materials etc? Does the plan suggest your approach to curriculum?

Group b. Share and discuss with colleagues.

Task 2 - Identify the Structure of Your Daily and Weekly Timetable

Indiv. a. Write out your weekly timetable — and your daily timetable. What features affect them? — use of equipment or space or additional teachers? — curriculum balance? — morning/ afternoon activities? — children's learning interests/needs?

Group b. Share and discuss with colleagues.

Task 3 - Identify Your Expectations Within the Classroom

Indiv. a. First Period of 'Observation' —

Decide on a fixed period of the day — and list ALL the expectations you make of pupils — that includes those you don't any longer have to say, and things you think they should be doing... e.g. walking into the room quietly; taking off coats; playing in the sand... etc. You may be able to write a skeleton list of expectations before the fixed period of time but leave plenty of room for those you suddenly become aware of when you are in the situation.

b. REPEAT this activity over the same period of time on another day/days until you feel confident with the activity. **NOTE** You may find it helpful to do this in relation to one or two children if you work an integrated day.

c. Second Period of 'Observation' —

Repeat over a different stretch of time that spans different school situations — or a longer one so you get a broader view of expectations. Start thinking about the reasons for these expectations.

Group d. Share and discuss with colleagues.

Task 4 - Identify the Purposes for Your Expectations

Indiv. a. How would *you* categorise these expectations you have listed in terms of their purposes and learning? Make a list and try and fit the expectations you have identified to them. Any left over?

Group b. Discuss and explain the categories and expectations with colleagues. To make communication easier, see if you can arrive at a mutually inclusive list of categories... and number them.

Indiv. c. List and number expectations as a sub-section of the appropriate category or categories (you may find that some activities and expectations have more than one purpose). For example if you identified a Listening Category and numbered it 1, listening to instructions might be 1.1; — to another pupil — 1.2 etc.

Indiv. d. Try using the coded expectations in the classroom to note expectations that one child is engaged with over a specific period.

Group e. Discuss difficulties.

Task 5 - Identify the Organisation of Expectations

Indiv. a. Note the way you organise expectations and activities within the period observed in Task 3a — e.g. Teacher Directed; Self Help; Group; Free Choice; Formal (all class); Incidental (not planned); Negotiated.

Some expectations may have a mixture of these structures.

Group b. Share, discuss and probably expand these organisational structures and decide on simple coding so expectation and organisation can be noted quickly — e.g. 1.1 F/TD — would mean all the class were being expected to listen to the instructions the teacher was giving.

Indiv. c. You might like to practise using coding for a whole day/ days. Did one form of organisation or activity predominate? Is there a pattern of organisation emerging?

Group d. Discuss with colleagues. What questions are you asking about children or curriculum?

Task 6 - Identify Pupils' Responses to Expectations and Organisational Structures

By now you will probably have a number of your own questions clearly identified about children or curriculum. If so pursue one of them while trying out the observations of children.

Indiv. a. Build on your normal observation of children by looking more specifically at FACE — BODY and VOICE responses to situations. Over a week try out and build lists of descriptive words for the expressions on children's faces as they respond to expectations; another list to describe body responses in relation to expectation (we learned we'd omitted gestures of non-verbal communication); and similarly for voice responses. The teachers found they had to add to these over time as they became more aware of subtle differences in response. Try to avoid being judgmental about the response description and try to describe what could be seen or heard.

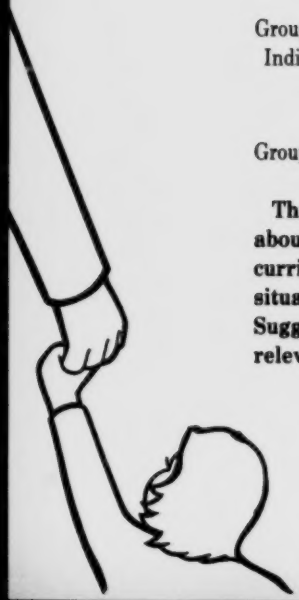
Group b. Share and discuss these descriptions with colleagues. If no-one feels compromised by it, draw up a shared list which may be added to over time.

Indiv. c. Use the expectation and organisation categorised to build an observation schedule during a day, and observe one, or more, child's responses to the expectations.

Group/ Indiv. Discuss the difficulties — make decisions if necessary, or required, — and
REPEAT observations over time so change may be observed and patterns of responses identified.

Group Discuss and decide on further action.

This form of 'action research' can be used to find out more about a particular child that concerns you; — to evaluate curriculum content or a new approach to organising learning situations; — or simply to identify the interests of children. Suggestions for practice which arose would have direct relevance to your own concerns and classroom.



Dr Gill Barrett's report contains 225 pages and is fully illustrated. It includes a bibliography and four appendices which give the reader

- a description of the research design and the methods of observation used by the teachers
- an analysis of the schools involved in the research
- a study of the policy of one LEA regarding Reception Children
- an account of current ideas concerning hyperactivity.

The full report, ***Starting School: An Evaluation of the Experience*** can be obtained from AMMA Headquarters. AMMA Representatives may obtain one copy for each school free of charge on request. The price to non-members is £5.00, including postage and packing. *The full title should be used when ordering this publication.*

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